A World On Fire

A Review by STANTON A. COBLENTZ.

A HISTORY OF THE GREAT WAR. In four volumes. By John Buchan. Houghton Mifflin Company.

IF some student of a thousand years hence should chance upon such a work as John Buchan's "History of the Great War" would he not be dazzled or incredulous at the spectacle it presents? The sight of a world on fire, of millions of trained men ranged along hundreds of miles of a flaming, thunderous battle front, of innumerable rockets blazing like evil lightning in the night, of liquid fire that sears the flesh, of poison gas that paralyzes the lungs, of howitzers that shatter stout fortifications like putty, of machines that drop destruction from the skies and of other machines that deal death from beneath the waves, of whole great civilian populations turned into little more than vast auxiliaries to the armies, and of at least one great nation forced into virtually the position of a beleagured city—all this presents a spectacle so appalling and yet so fantastic that we might believe it to be the product of some diseased imagination did we not know it to have been the reality.

It is only the fact that the war is still seen in close perspective that makes us accept the stupendous truth with equanimity; to the historian of several centuries hence—assuming that some method will have been found to curb human destructiveness—it may appear as the nightmare of a delirious man; yet, even for a contemporary, it is impossible to read a work such as John Buchan's history without sensations of renewed surprise, of horror and of a deep though impotent regret that such a calamity should have been possible. In the pages of this book we live again the distressing and spectacular years from 1914 to 1918; we witness again, at close range, and yet dispassionately, the events that were to distort the face of civilization and leave progress to walk barefooted over a road of thorns; we are given intimate and picturesque glimpses of the whole great drama, the tragedy of a world, staged on the arena of a continent.

And truly, as Mr. Buchan makes it evident, that tragedy is one worthy of the attention of the most keen sighted historian. A new Gibbon migh well honor it with his skill, tracing, perhaps, the decline and fall of European civilization; for, though the fall of that civilization may yet be averted, its decline is flashed in letters of flame across the landscape of the world war. This fact is indicated on every page of Mr. Buchan's four volumes, for, while the author himself is not inclined to be unduly pessimistic, yet pessimistic conclusions are plainly written into most of the facts he finds himself forced to mention.

In spite of the pessimism inherent in his theme—perhaps because of it—Mr. Buchan has given us a vital and important work. He describes minutely, in a vigorous and graphic style, the main events of the war from the murder of the Austrian Archduke to the signing of the armistice; he discusses in detail the operations in France, in Russia, on the Austrian front, and in the German colonies; he neglects no circumstance that has any direct bearing on the course of the war, from the Russian revolution to pre-war sentiment in America; and he subjects all the events he describes to the light of a vivid and illuminating criticism, which, while it does not impress one as invariably accurate, yet always has the imprint of individual thinking. In the beginning the author appears to have been guilty of a grave omission when, in discussing the events immediately leading up to the war, he neglects to mention the secret diplomatic agreements, which are no longer secret; but one can readily forgive the author this oversight in view of the thoroughness with which he has covered his subject on the whole.

And perhaps Mr. Buchan's work is as good a history of the war as we may expect for many years to come. In his preface the author issues a plea for the contemporary historian, pointing out that Thucydides and many another great historian wrote of the events of his own day; that the contemporary writer gains in vividness and conviction, and that, in the case of the recent war, the mass of data on hand is so vast that the future chronicler will find it almost impossible to sift the material properly. Against the contemporary historian the argument most often urged is that he lacks perspective and the broad impartiality of years; but, in the case of Mr. Buchan these contentions have little force since the author certainly is gifted with vision and background, and undeniably examines the case of both sides without animosity and with only that minimum of bias with which, being human, we are prone to regard events even so remote as the wars of the Greeks and Persians or of the Romans and Carthaginians.

All of the nations, Mr. Buchan implies, were in some measure responsible for the conflict, for in 1914 all were afflicted with what the author terms "Nationalism of the pocket"—a utilitarian philosophy that exalted material things simply because they were material, that worshiped gold for gold's sake only, and that estimated the greatness of nations according to their industrial and commercial resources rather than according to their contribution to art, science, or literature. The natural accompaniment of this sordid nationalism was an aggressive militarism, for when men have come to value pearls above poetry and a favorable balance of trade above a favorable balance of conscience it is to be expected that they will prefer might to right and will devote themselves assiduously to the defense of material things. And so, in 1914, all the nations of Europe were highly armed and presented much the spectacle of an oil soaked pyre ready to burst into flames at the touch of a match. The particular match that appeared was the murder of the Archduke; but, had not this pretext occurred some other excuse would doubtless have arisen, for Germany, apparently, was bent on military expansion, and Russia and Austria appear likewise to have been courting disaster.

In one way the position of Germany was unique, for militarism had taken an even firmer hold on her than on any of her neighbors, and for nearly half a century the minds and energies of her people had been devoted to the formation of an efficient fighting machine. Yet, paradoxically, the very thoroughness of the German method ultimately proved the undoing of Germany. For the Germans were not only systematic; they were too systematic; they overemphasized pin points, and by so doing overlooked mountains; they shaped themselves according to a preconceived mold, and thereby precluded the possibility of growth, of genius, and of that unforeseen but saving brilliance that sometimes alters the destiny of nations. It is perhaps for this reason that Germany, where militarism was studied as an art and things military given a rank second not even to God, passed through the greatest war of history without producing a single general of the first rank. Mr. Buchan is touching upon a profound truth when he observes, "Human energy is limited, and if too much thought be given to minor things no vitality will be left for the great matters. The weakness could be observed in many activities of the modern German mind. . . . But it was most conspicuous in war. Frederick and Moltke were military geniuses of a high order; but the military genius did not appear in Germany's superbly provided armies, for there was no room in them for the higher kind of intelligence. German industry was not mature; it was like the painful, unintelligent absorption of a child. No amount of organizing the second rate will produce the first rate."

None the less, declares the author, "History will not deny to Germany the credit of a tremendous achievement." At the start she alone showed "a proper boldness in conception, a proper vigor and tenacity in execution"; and as the conflict proceeded she manifested a decided elasticity in changing her plans as necessity dictated; her people proved themselves capable of enduring extreme suffering and privation; her soldiers won widespread admiration for their resolution and ability on the field of battle. Unfortunately these virtues are insufficient to atone for the crimes of the war; unfortunately they cannot repair one small fraction of the losses suffered either by Germany or the Allies; unfortunately, when we summarize all the advantages of war—doubtful advantages at best—we find that by the side of the undeniable evils of the conflict they are as the benefits of a fire that leaves thousands homeless and proves several of the firemen to be courageous.

Mr. Buchan indeed does strive energetically to isolate an occasional gleam of

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